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Herkman, Juha

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## ARTICULATIONS OF POPULISM: THE NORDIC CASE

**Author:**

Juha Herkman

Academy Research Fellow

Department of Social Research, Media and Communication Studies

P.O. Box 54

00014 University of Helsinki

Finland

E-mail: [juha.herkman@helsinki.fi](mailto:juha.herkman@helsinki.fi)

Webpage: <http://blogs.helsinki.fi/jherkman>

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**Abstract:**

Populism as a concept is elusive and has been connected to very different political movements. Generally, populism's connotations are rather negative and the term is often used pejoratively in the academic field as well. However, Ernesto Laclau has approached populism by arguing that populist reason is a manifestation of political logic in which group identification – formed through various signifiers such as 'the people', which are articulated as part of an 'equivalence chain' – eventually establishes political agency as a totality. This paper uses Laclau's articulation theory to analyse the public construction of contemporary populism in the Nordic countries of Sweden, Finland, Norway and Denmark. The analysis demonstrates that mainstream media frame populism rather negatively, although examples of the term's positive identification with 'the people' are available, especially in the tabloid media. Thus, the positive identification behind the forming of populist movements clashes with the media discourse that prioritises established journalistic views, practices and sources, making populism a 'floating signifier', i.e. a concept that has several meanings which are contested in various public discourses. A general pattern in the construction of populism in Northern European multi-party democracies can be discerned, thus identifying the central role of nationalist and nativist identifications in contingent populist articulations. However, the differences between the Nordic countries emphasise a context-driven approach.

**Keywords:** populism, Laclau, articulation theory, Nordic countries, floating signifier, radical contextualism

Populism is an elusive concept that has been linked to very different political movements throughout history (Canovan 1999, Taggart 2000). In many political cultures and in many languages the term ‘populism’ carries negative or pejorative rather than positive connotations, even though the etymological background of the word, deriving from the Latin noun ‘populus’ meaning ‘the people’, gives it an emancipative or empowering signification (Williams 1988, p. 66). A ‘thin’ definition of populism strips the term from its pejorative and authoritarian connotations by connecting it to ‘a political communication style of political actors that refers to the people’ (Jagers and Walgrave 2006, p. 322). However, this definition has been thought to be too simplistic since a populist style usually is linked to anti-establishment ideas and the scapegoating of minority groups for the problems facing the majority population, which combines a populist style with a political ideology, no matter how ill-defined that ideology is (Mazzoleni 2014, p. 46, Jagers and Walgrave 2006, p. 336-337). Therefore, an appeal to ‘the people’ and antagonistic opposition to not just minorities but ‘the establishment’ and the values they supposedly represent has been defined as one of the most common features of populism in modern democracies (Canovan 1999, p. 3; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2012, p. 12).

Given the elusiveness of defining populism as a term, or perhaps because of the term’s vagueness, it has been given scant consideration by academics. In fact, some political scientists have questioned its value as an analytical tool and hence avoided using the term for research purposes (cf. Taggart 2000). Generally, the meaning and definition of the term has been taken for granted and used rather negatively to refer to spurious political or cultural speech styles that dubiously court ‘the people’, voters, or a mass audience that carries ‘traditional, common sense beliefs’. This pejorative use of the term has been commonplace in the academic world as well (Bale *et al.* 2011, Canovan 2005), where populism has often been partnered with right-wing radicalism, nativism, xenophobia and racism (Rydgren 2004, Mudde 2007).

Ernesto Laclau's (2005a) theory on 'populist reason' is an exception regarding the analysis of populism. Laclau's analysis springs from his earlier works on the hegemonic organisation of social movements through contingent discursive articulations of 'equivalence chains' that are connected to specific social antagonisms (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). He approaches populism as an ontological construction rather than as an ontic entity. In this, Laclau's theory is actually not about populism in its narrow sense as political style or movement, rather it looks upon populism as a highly abstract explanation for the whole logic of a political agency and thus the structuration of social life (cf. Marchart 2012, pp. 224-225).

According to Laclau (2005a), populist movements arise when some social demands are united through a signifier, such as the name of political leader, a shared enemy, etc., allowing the identification of social subjectivity and political agency to become credible, and thus the unity of a group is constituted (pp. 72-74, 127-132). Therefore, Laclau's explanation encompasses both right- and left-wing populism as well as different populist movements in various contexts (pp. 86-87), which has also resulted in his theory being contested. Whereas some scholars have adopted his theory (e.g. Müller 2014, Savage 2014), the majority of the empirically orientated political analyses of populism have not adopted his work. One reason for this is that populism, in Laclau's formulation, has become synonymous with all politics (Arditi 2010, see also Laclau 2005b, pp. 47-48), thus losing its particularity and making populism difficult to study as a specific empirical phenomenon. Another reason is that populism is often identified with such reprehensible phenomena as xenophobia and racism, which makes a possible positive identification of the term undesirable.

However, Laclau's theory of populism is especially interesting from the perspective of cultural analysis because he emphasises the discursive dimension in political activity and links 'popular' and 'populism' as concepts inherent to each other. Therefore, his 'articulation theory' has been applied by some prominent cultural scholars (e.g. Hall 1988, Grossberg 1992). This paper applies

Laclau's populism theory to analyse articulations of contemporary populism in the Nordic countries. The analysis uses empirical studies on the public construction of populism in Nordic media (Herkman 2015; 2016) as well as studies on the self-identification of the Nordic populist movements, especially those on social media sites (e.g. Niemi 2013, Sakki and Pettersson 2016), but the main task here is, in the name of 'radical contextualism' (Grossberg 1992), to explore the context in which populism in contemporary Northern Europe flourishes. The article starts with a short introduction to Laclau's theory on populism. After that Nordic populism is discussed as part of the European neo-populist movement. The empirical studies are then discussed as part of the articulation analysis. Finally, the paper concludes with a critical reflection on Laclau's theory.

### **Laclau's theory on populist reason**

The foundation of Laclau's theorisations on populism was laid down in his early work *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory* (1977), in which he applied the Gramscian concept of hegemony to explain the connections between ideologies, social forces and political movements. The main idea of this work was to disengage from orthodox Marxian structural explanations and instead highlight the contingent nature of political ideological connotations. Laclau developed the so-called 'articulation theory', which challenged class-based Marxian structuralism by claiming that classes cannot be thought of as ideologically and politically reductionist because they result from articulations in which class discourse is combined (or articulated) together with various non-class interpellations deriving from existing political conjuncture (pp. 10, 160-162). According to Laclau, this also explains why 'classes and empirically observable groups do not necessary coincide' (p. 163).

For Laclau populism lies not in the movement as such and is not a particular ideological discourse, instead, it is a non-class contradiction connected to ideological discourse, appealing to people from all class divisions (pp. 164-165). What is essential in populism is the concept of 'people', contrasted antagonistically against the 'power-bloc'. However, as argued before, this antagonism is not

dependent on class structures but on non-class interpellations of ‘popular traditions’ that ‘are crystallized in symbols or values in which the subjects interpellated by them find a principle of identity’ (p. 166).<sup>i</sup> Thus, popular traditions create various elements that can be linked to class discourses, explaining why ‘the most divergent political movements appeal to the same ideological symbols’ (p. 167). For example, one has only to think of the use of Che Guevara’s portrait in various political and non-political contexts today to become convinced of Laclau’s interpretation.

Laclau continued his theorization of the ‘political’ together with Chantal Mouffe, developing ideas on hegemonic and counter-hegemonic articulations as the very base of social order (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Articulation theory was then adopted also by prominent cultural scholars like Stuart Hall (see Grossberg 1986; also Hay 2011), who applied Laclau’s ideas, for example, in his analysis of ‘Thatcherism’. Hall (1988) demonstrated how Thatcher’s neo-liberal and conservative ideology could gain large-scale support among very heterogeneous people, because the historical context enabled re-articulation of hegemonic power. However, Laclau’s theory of populism reached its logical climax in his last monograph *On Populist Reason* (2005a), where he applied post-structural language and discourse theories originally derived from Saussurean structuralism and the theory of signs, where the ‘ideas and values of popular traditions’ are turned into ‘empty’ and ‘floating’ signifiers.

Deriving theories from French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981), Laclau (2005a) refers to an ‘empty signifier’ by which he means a term that can signify various social demands that are linked to each other through an ‘equivalence chain’ in a highly heterogeneous reality. In this process, the signifier becomes ‘emptied’ of fixed meanings but also harnessed to the identification of a political agency that is seen as a totality (pp. 96-98, 2005b, pp. 39-42). The typical empty signifier is ‘the people’, which is used by a heterogeneous group that has come to conceive of and experience itself as an underdog in relation to a hegemonic power-bloc, but who, in a populist political process, make the empty signifier a metonymic marker

of an ideal unity of political agency. In populist reasoning the '*plebs* can identify itself with the *populus* conceived as an ideal totality' (Laclau 2005a, p. 94). Other such signifiers used in political processes are, for example, 'power', 'elite' and names of the political 'leaders' or 'enemies'.

A 'floating signifier', in turn, refers to re-articulations of these terms because of the inherent ambiguity of a social order and because empty signifiers cannot ever acquire any ultimate stability (Laclau 2005b, p. 43). Laclau (2005a) applies Žižek's idea of 'naming' as a key signifying operation in which the identity of a political agency is very affectively constructed (pp. 101-106). The meanings of floating signifiers are contested, especially 'in periods of organic crisis, when the symbolic system needs to be radically recast' (p. 132). However, Laclau reminds us that the distinction between empty and floating signifiers is mainly analytical and in practice they overlap in the processes of naming (Laclau 2005a, p. 133, 2005b, p. 43).

There has been debate, for example, about Laclau's misuse of psychoanalytical concepts in his political theory (e.g. Glynos and Stavrakakis 2004, Bush 2012, Perelló and Biglieri 2012). Some of these criticisms might be apposite from the psychoanalytic perspective, although Laclau (2012) has rebutted them. However, in spite of how apt his use of psychoanalytical concepts is, Laclau's theory is an interesting effort to open up the affective appeal of populism by pointing out how antagonistic signifying processes are necessary in the formation of political identity. Therefore, his theory combines discursive and material dimensions in a way that no other political theory has done.

In my opinion, a more important criticism of Laclau would have been the consideration of the totalising nature of his theory, which has probably been extended too far in making populism an all-encompassing explanation for all political activity, thus limiting its use by empirical studies wishing to research specific phenomenon in the political field (see Bowman 2007, pp. 543-544, Ardit 2010). The problem was perhaps not so prominent in his earlier works but arises in his last monograph, in which 'populist reason' is identified with all 'popular politics' (cf. Hay 2012, p. 678).



Another problem in his theory is that it does not comment on the actual communication processes nor the central role of the media in the spread of populist sentiment, something that has been indicated in several studies (e.g. Mazzoleni *et al.* 2003, Boomgaarden and Vliegenthart 2006, Albertazzi and McDonnell 2008, Koopmans and Muis 2009, Roodjuin 2014). As Hay (2012) reminds us in his critique, Laclau oversees the technologies and rationalities by which political movements, other organisations and even the populations of nation states have been managed or governed (pp. 677-678). This is somehow surprising in times when a plethora of studies proclaim the ‘mediatisation’ of politics and populism (e.g. Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, Lundby 2009, Mazzoleni 2014).

Nevertheless, Laclau’s theory serves an interesting starting point for the cultural analysis of populism because it creates a link between the discursive and material dimension in political activity. This study employs Laclau’s idea of the ‘floating signifier’ and approaches populism as a construction whose meanings are contested in the public discourses of the Nordic countries. The perspective here comes close to those favoured in the early phase of British cultural studies by Williams and Hall in their analyses of ‘popular’ (see Hay 2011, pp. 668-670). Therefore, an analysis of the articulations of populism reveals the political and cultural contexts in which populism as a floating signifier is used. This accords with the idea of ‘radical contextualism’ (Grossberg 2010, p. 24) in which cultural meanings become understandable only in relation to other aspects of reality, such as politics, economy and materiality.

### **Political populism in the Nordic countries**

The context of the study is four Nordic countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, which provide an interesting framework for this approach for three reasons. Firstly, there is a long history of populist movements in the Nordic countries. Furthermore, at least one political party in each country has been called ‘populist’ and gained remarkable success during the twenty-first century, resulting in much public debate about populism. Secondly, the Nordic countries have remarkably

similar media and political systems, representing multi-party democracies that have a strong reliance on consensual decision-making, which, in turn, is scrutinised by a highly professional media (see Hallin and Mancini 2004, Strömbäck *et al.* 2008). Thirdly, despite their similarities, the geopolitical, cultural and language contexts of the Nordic countries vary, especially in their political cultures and in the formation of their populist movements (Fryklund 2015, Herkman 2015).

**Table 1.** The Nordic populist parties

	Established	Into parliament (votes % / seats)	Leaders	Votes % / seats in parliament	Government / opposition
<i>Norwegian Progress Party (NFP)</i>	1973	1973 (5% / 4)	Siv Jensen (2006-) Carl I. Hagen (1978-2006)	16.3% / 29 (2013)	Government (2013-)
<i>Danish People's Party (DF)</i>	1995	1998 (7.4% / 13)	Kristian Thulesen Dahl (2012-) Pia Kjaersgaard (1995-2012)	21.1% / 37 (2015)	Assisting government 2001-2011 and 2015-
<i>Finns Party (PS)</i>	1995	1995 (1% / 1)	Jussi Halla-aho (2017-) Timo Soini (1996-2017)	17.7% / 38 (2015)	Opposition, government (2015-2017)
<i>Sweden Democrats (SD)</i>	1988	2010 (5.7% / 20)	Jimmie Åkesson (2005-) Mikael Jansson (1995-2005)	12.9% / 49 (2014)	Opposition, cordon sanitaire

In the Nordic countries included in this study, those anti-elite populist movements that have combined nation-centric perspectives and been critical of immigration have enjoyed remarkable success in the twenty-first century (see Table 1). The Norwegian Progress Party (Fremskrittspartiet, NFP) was the largest party in Norway in opinion polls in the early 2010s and joined the conservative government after the 2013 general elections. The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset, PS) was the second largest party in the 2015 parliamentary elections of Finland and joined the governing cabinet. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DF) assisted the conservative government between 2001 and 2011 and again after 2015 elections, in which the party became the second largest. The Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD), won seats in the

Swedish parliament for the first time in 2010 and in the 2014 parliamentary elections the party gained an astonishing 12.9 percent share of the vote, upsetting Sweden's political *status quo*.

All the parties above have infiltrated their political arenas as clear populist movements by protesting against a ruling elite and appealing to the 'people' by saying they are the opposition to that elite.

NFP was established in the early 1970, and DF and PS are spin-offs of antecedent populist parties from the same period. SD is an exception, although established in 1988, the party only gained success in the 2010s. Sweden did not face a clear successful populist movement before that, which is rare in Europe.<sup>ii</sup> The first wave of populism in Finland, Norway and Denmark protested against the strong taxation of the welfare state system and flourished during the structural change from agrarian to urban industrial societies. The popularity of contemporary populist parties has bloomed during the twenty-first century after their intense questioning of immigration and the EU. Some of their most radical members have also faced court cases for racist or discriminatory statements and the parties have demanded very strict immigration policies whenever possible (see Rydgren 2010). In this regard, the parties can be identified as belonging to Western Europe's populist, radical, right-wing family (Jungar and Jupskås 2014).

Nevertheless, the Nordic populist parties cannot be directly compared to the most radical populist right-wing movements of Western and Eastern Europe because, according to the European Social Survey (ESS), supporters of the Nordic parties are quite different and rely on a democratic society (Mesežnikov *et al.* 2008, Paloheimo 2012, p. 337). Populism in the Nordic countries has not been as radical in nature or as offensive in tone to minorities as in countries where politics, in general, has been more confrontational (Widfeldt 2010, p. 179). NFP and DF, and also perhaps PS, have become established political players over the years, appearing to be more mainstream than traditional populist movements (see Herkman 2015). Only SD has been completely excluded from the political establishment by a 'cordon sanitaire' (see Rydgren 2005, p. 117).

Hallin and Mancini (2004) have identified the Nordic countries as being typical representatives of the ‘Democratic Corporatist’ model of politics and media systems. Media in that model have a strong reliance on public service broadcasting and state intervention; nevertheless, media autonomy, professionalisation and commercial media markets are highly developed in these countries. Such ‘co-existence’ may even be the feature that most significantly distinguishes the Nordic media system from the Liberal North Atlantic model and the Mediterranean Polarised Pluralistic model found in Hallin and Mancini’s categorisation, because in these models state interventions and highly professionalized and developed media markets ‘do not appear simultaneously’ or with whom they might even ‘be perceived as incompatible’ (Strömbäck *et al.* 2008, pp. 19-20).

However, Hallin and Mancini (2004) conclude their analysis by saying that ‘the differences among these models, and in general the degree of variation among nation states, have diminished substantially over time’, meaning European media systems are changing ‘toward the Liberal Model that prevails in its purest form in North America’ (pp. 251-252). This is also true of the Nordic countries where the media has commercialised significantly in recent decades, meaning fewer partisan connections, greater financial challenges from public service broadcasting and increasing competition with market-driven content (Herkman 2009). Furthermore, the explosion in the popularity of social media has caused financial difficulties, especially for traditional newspaper houses, which have lost many of their paying customers during the twenty-first century (Nordicom 2016). On the one hand, the changes in the Nordic media environment have made addressing a populist audience more tempting for traditional news media. On the other hand, a gap between the news media and the type of discussion encountered in online fora has arisen due to social media, which often promotes conservative values and even hate speech, which has not existed in the Nordic countries’ liberal news media.

## **Construction of Nordic populism**

In the Nordic countries included in the study, the domestic populist party seems to match Laclau's idea on the formation of populist agency, at least in its early phase of development. Initially, there has been sufficient dissatisfaction with or distrust of a hegemonic power-bloc, which was especially apparent during the 1990s and early 2000s, nurturing the emergence of the protest sentiment essential for populist reasoning (cf. Mazzoleni 2003, p. 10). As studies on such social media sites as blogs popular among the supporters of the populist movements demonstrate, societal underdogs, or those that consider themselves underdogs, have found and identified various signifiers, such as global business corporations; supranational unions, like the EU; domestic politicians and political parties; and especially immigrants or other minorities as their enemies (e.g. Sakki and Pettersson 2016). Freedom of speech and 'openness' have been used as common arguments in creating populist antagonisms (Elmgren 2015). These underdogs have then coalesced into a united political agent that goes under the name of a populist movement and its leader (see Niemi 2013). One common feature found from their party platforms has been a nationalist or nativist emphasis, a notion which is also represented in the very titles of the Nordic populist parties and, therefore, linking these parties to Western European populist right-wing movements (see Jungar and Jupskås 2014).

However, media analyses of these parties tell a different story. During the first parliamentary elections of the 2010s, all these parties played an essential role and gained significant media attention. Especially in Finland, but also in Sweden and in Norway, the domestic populist parties were successful and were mentioned in 43 to 59 per cent of all election articles (n=3.337) published in the largest quality and tabloid newspapers of the countries during the final campaign period (Herkman 2015).<sup>iii</sup> Nevertheless, the majority of these articles approached the populist party rather critically or negatively. There were differences between the countries, but the domestic populist parties in general were often assessed critically with regard to European right-wing populism,

extreme nationalism, xenophobia and racism. The Swedish media was especially negative towards the Sweden Democrats and its National Socialist background. The Finns Party and the Danish People's Party were also discussed critically in relation to Europe's extreme right, although there were fewer of these kinds of stories than in Sweden. In Finland, a more neutral tone was popular in news stories, and some articles published by the tabloid press also adopted a populist audience address – reminiscent of the rhetoric favoured by the Finns Party (cf. Jungar 2010, pp. 215-216). Only the Norwegian Progress Party was discussed relative positively by the Norwegian press, indicating the more established and normalised status of the party in its domestic arena compared to other Nordic populist movements (cf. Jungar and Jupskås 2014, Allern 2013).

The negative tone common in Nordic news articles discussing the domestic populist parties can be explained partly by journalistic routines, such as news criteria emphasising negativity and a critical perspective (Van Dalen 2012, Herkman 2015). However, an even more plausible explanation is that populism as a term and phenomenon is generally seen in a negative light in Nordic political cultures and languages. The analysis of the public usage of populist terminology during the election campaigns demonstrates that the Nordic press avoids the use of the term, and when the term is used, its significations are generally negative (Herkman 2016). In this, the Nordic press is quite reminiscent of the British press, in which the word 'populism' is also seldom used and is mainly harnessed to pejorative meanings regarding a broad variety of actors and topics (Bale *et al.* 2011).

As in the British case, Nordic populism often refers to 'empty political rhetoric' in public discourse – statements that do not result in actual political acts, trust or responsibility (Herkman 2016).

However, populism, when explicitly mentioned is often linked to nationalism and/or nativist ideology, in which non-native inhabitants are seen as a threat to the nation (cf. Mudde 2007).

Especially in Sweden, but also in all other Nordic countries, these connotations of populism have been common, linking populism univocally and critically to European radical right-wing movements. Only the Finnish tabloid media has discussed populism as a possible manifestation of

‘the people’ or democracy in some of its news articles thus enabling positive identifications of political agency in the Laclauian sense (Herkman 2016).

Therefore, it is evident that in the Nordic countries the public discourse on populism is rather critical and confronts the self-identification of those who are called populist in that discourse. The consequence of this is that populism as a term is also avoided by populists themselves, who construct their political group identity mainly through social media. The exception might be the Finns Party, which strategically used ‘populism’ as a marker of its ideology – open and down-to-earth, thus different to corrupt elite and old parties – when the party raised its profile before the breakthrough elections of 2011 (Elmgren 2015, pp. 102-111). This signification was also favoured in some articles published by the Finnish tabloid press during the 2011 elections. However, more recently, the party has abandoned this positive identification with populism, trying to portray themselves as a mainstream political party rather than a radical protest movement (Palonen 2016).

Thus, populism appears in the Nordic countries as a ‘floating signifier’ whose meanings are contested in various public arenas. The antagonism between ‘the people’ and the ‘corrupt elite’ or non-native inhabitants and foreign cultures is established in the self-identifications of the populist movements, mainly manifested in the social media sites popular among their supporters and, more rarely, in news media discourses. The supporters of these movements identify themselves as being against a hegemonic ‘power-bloc’ of political, economic and cultural elites, including the mainstream news media. However, this ‘power-bloc’ still dominates official public discourse promoting liberal democratic values and opposing the nationalist approach favoured by populists.

### **Articulations and their context**

Paloheimo (2012) has noted that populist parties have been successful in multi-party democracies that rely on consensual decision-making, because established parties that resemble each other in several ways can easily be criticized as an elitist cartel (p. 329). Thus, the soil has been fertile for

the spreading of populist sentiment in the Nordic countries, even if these countries are the world's most solid representatives of the welfare state system and their political systems have been rather stable since the 1970s – when welfare state ideology gained wide support among their populations. It was actually not until the twenty-first century and 'the big bang elections' that the populist parties really shook the *status quo* of politics in the Nordic countries (Arter 2012).

Thus, it can be claimed that 'two waves of populism' in the Nordic countries have been constructed, especially in relation to welfare state ideology, constituting the major political conjuncture in these countries from the late twentieth century to the early twenty-first century. The first wave was seen in the 1970s when the precursors of the current populist parties were established in Finland, Denmark and Norway as a protest against the strong taxation policies promoted by welfare state ideology. In populist imaginaries the state was equated with bureaucratic governance and represented by corrupt political and economic elites. In the second wave of populism the protest has targeted the established parties that adopted a neo-liberal approach during the 1990s and early twenty-first century, which challenged the welfare state ideology that, in turn, had become very popular among the people and diminished traditional class divisions in the Nordic countries.

The articulations of populism vary in different Nordic countries depending on their political and cultural conjunctures, but a common denominator in all four countries has been a nationalist approach combined with criticism of immigration. As noted by Laclau (1977), nationalism in itself has no class connotation (p. 160). This is especially true in contemporary Nordic countries in which nationalist populism has been linked to both right- and left-wing ideologies. The domestic populist parties have been successful precisely because they have succeeded to take voters from both leftist and conservative mainstream parties. In Finland and Sweden, the left-wing approach of social equity and a strong welfare state attract voters, in Norway and Denmark more right-wing emphasis opposing a strong state and supporting liberal markets have helped the success of their contemporary populist parties.



In Sweden, Sweden Democrats has focused mainly on criticising immigration but, in order to become a more mainstream party, they have connected that criticism to questions about social equality, claiming that immigration threatens the social security of native inhabitants. According to Fryklund (2015), the long-term social democratic hegemony in Sweden has promoted this kind of articulation. In Finland, the Finns Party has connected social equity and criticism of immigration, saying that immigration is expensive and that immigrants cause crime. This articulation is partly derived from the Finns Party's predecessor, the Finnish Rural Party, which promoted itself as 'a defender of ordinary people'. However, in Finland much of the support for the Finns Party also relies on Euroscepticism; the party has been the most consistent advocate of Euroscepticism in Finland, presenting the EU as a threat to national sovereignty, whereas mainstream parties have mostly supported the EU – at least when joining the governing cabinet (e.g. Raunio 2008). Criticism of the EU can easily be linked to nationalism or nativist ideology in Finland as it is the only Nordic country using the Euro currency.

Euroscepticism has also been an important signifier in Danish populist rhetoric, alongside criticism of immigration. However, Danish People's Party generally supports right-wing policies promoting a market economy instead of state intervention. Thus, the Danish People's Party has promoted 'welfare dualism' by saying native inhabitants should have stronger welfare benefits than immigrants (see Bay *et al.* 2013). In Norway, the long history of Norwegian Progress Party has connected it to a libertarian ideology as opposed to a strong nation state, even though the party adopted nativist immigration criticism as part of its rhetoric in the late twentieth century. However, the link between the party and the extreme nationalist mass-murderer Anders Behring Breivik after his terrorist attacks in 2011 diminished the popularity of this kind of articulation and thereby the popularity of the party (Figenschou *et al.* 2014), which now tries to profile itself as a mainstream conservative party rather than a radical populist movement (see Jungar and Jupskås 2014, Allern 2013).

Even if the Nordic populist parties have succeeded in gaining supporters from various social strata, their emphasis on nationalist approach has appealed more to male than female voters (Paloheimo 2012, p. 332). This has been true especially during their early development ('insurgent phases'), but when they have become more established and mainstream in their political field, these parties have also attracted female voters (cf. Stewart *et al.* 2003, pp. 219-223). Thus, it appears that these parties have to limit their radical rhetoric to become really popular in liberal democracies. However, they can still maintain their antagonistic status in relation to the ruling elites because, in Nordic democracies, most established parties (and the mainstream news media) have rather liberal values on issues like immigration, sexual minorities, religion and human rights. Even right-wing parties are not 'conservative' in this sense. Thus, populist parties can link conservative values along with other signifiers, mostly with nationalism, and gain support across the party field, even if the voters would not otherwise identify themselves with the movement.

According to Laclau (2005a), populist identifications become common especially during organic crises in the political system (p. 132). However, this does not necessarily mean economic crises. On the contrary, it seems that in such small countries as the Nordic countries a deep economic crisis increases a consensus orientation (as an external threat would), because their populations have absorbed the view that the unity of the nation will serve as a way out of a crisis. As Fryklund (2015) has remarked, whereas the extreme right-wing movements usually become commonly stronger during economic crises, populist parties gain success in times when the economy and social welfare system work well or at least decently. However, there might be strong structural changes going on, challenging the traditional class based party system, something which occurred in Finland during the 1970s when the nation urbanised very rapidly (see Helander 1971). The result was a successful populist movement, the Finnish Rural Party, a predecessor of the contemporary Finns Party, which is a party that has benefitted from the traditional pulp and paper industry and manufacturing and

technology industries confronting serious difficulties during the twenty-first century, meaning significant structural changes in several regions of the country (cf. Borg 2012).

Therefore, it can be argued that nationalist and nativist ideologies combined with a hostile attitude towards immigration have been connected to very heterogeneous political demands in Nordic populism, those demands often deriving from globalisation processes that challenge their ability to maintain a welfare state ideology. These challenges include such things as the increasing power of transnational business corporations and supranational unions at the expense of the nation states, the increasing transition of hard industries and their workplaces to countries of cheap labour and rising immigration due to economic or other reasons. All these challenges have changed the historical structuration of the welfare state system in the Nordic countries, in which consensual multi-party democracy has established a welfare state ideology.

Hallin and Mancini's (2004) definition of the Democratic Corporatist model defines the period in which the *status quo* of the consensual multi-party system was established. In the Nordic countries this was the period of social democratic regimes combining both liberal market values and a strong welfare state ideology. However, as discussed earlier, globalisation and neo-liberal policies began to challenge the system after the 1980s in the Nordic countries, meaning a transition that Manin (1997) has called a change from 'party democracy' towards 'audience democracy'. Whereas party democracy emphasised political identifications with class-based mass parties, in audience democracy, political identification is mostly tied to personal choices and to individual politicians made popular by the media. In this transition, the ideological differences between the parties become unclear and political decision-making looks merely like a series of bureaucratic or technocratic performances, thus alienating people from party politics.

It is precisely this 'un-politicization' of the consensual multi-party system that created the space for populist parties in the Democratic Corporatist countries of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Even if there were no economic crises – on the contrary, many Democratic

Corporatist countries had economic booms – there was a structural crisis in the party systems that was eroding the credibility of politics and enabling the spread of public criticism and populist sentiment. The most common denominators of populism, namely criticism of immigration and the distrust of mainstream parties, could be connected to various social demands such as employment, social security and national sovereignty. The nostalgic yearning for the imaginary homogeneity of the ‘nation state’ (see Jameson 1984) combined with ‘enemies’ threatening that homogeneity formed the necessary signifiers that had populist appeal for those who were invested in the ‘loosely connected’ ideas behind those signifiers. Thus, the signifiers were very affectively given meaning by groups from various classes in the Nordic populations.

In those processes of signification, new communication technologies and services such as blogs and social media sites were harnessed, enabling the effective formation of the group identity that is necessary if a large-scale mobilisation, such as a contemporary populist movement, is to succeed. Therefore, the relationship between contemporary populism and the so-called mediatisation of politics is twofold: On the one hand, the mediatisation of politics has increased the spread of populist sentiment by promoting ‘audience democracy’ in which a general distrust towards politics grows and populist leaders skilled in rhetoric can raise their popularity. On the other hand, the mainstream news media is generally hostile to populist ideas of nationalism and nativism in liberal democracies, forcing populist movements to use non-journalistic media, such as social media sites in their identity formation. This is what Jenkins (2008) has described in the concept of ‘convergence culture’, in which old and new media collide in multiple and unpredictable ways.

The analysis of the Nordic countries demonstrates that populism in these countries is a ‘floating signifier’, whose meanings are contested in various public and semi-public arenas. In contrast to the Laclauian comprehension of the term, in which populism is understood as a political logic by which a group of people identifies itself positively as the political agency, the Nordic media and its sources predominantly discuss populism in a pejorative way. Accordingly, the floating signifiers of

‘the people’, ‘the nation’ and their ‘enemies’ (such as immigrants) are linked in negative ways by the media to the use of populism – as it had been defined with respect to Europe’s extreme right movements and/or how it was used to critically assess the domestic populist parties from the perspective of their nativist ideology. A positive political identification with these signifiers is promoted almost solely by the supporters of the populist movements on their own social media sites.

Thus, the problem with Laclau’s theory is that even if it creates a complex abstraction of discursive populist processes, it does not discuss the concrete communication practices in which populist reason is constructed. In particular, Laclau says nothing about the role of the media in these processes, although a plethora of studies has proclaimed the ‘mediatization of politics’ and populism as part of politics since the 1980s (e.g. Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999, Lundby 2009, Mazzoleni 2014). Nevertheless, this study does not support the mediatisation thesis because the news media seem to be generally hostile to positive populist significations, even if the media might support an atmosphere that is hostile to politics and which is therefore conducive to populism well before the populist movements gain success in party field. Another problem is that Laclau calls all political identifications populist – even if there are no apparent antagonistic contradictions between ‘the people’ and their ‘enemies’ – and does not see the contextual differences in populist formations (cf. Marchant 2012, p. 235). It is therefore justified to ask if the model of populist reason really explains the construction of political agency and the structuration of social life with the totality that Laclau implies in his seminal theorisation.

However, the analysis of Nordic populism demonstrates that Laclau’s theory on populism serves as an interesting link between the cultural micro-political and the societal macro-political formations (Marchant 2012). It is somewhat paradoxical that the former Laclauian articulation theory, applied by cultural scholars such as Hall and Grossberg, seems to create a more apt framework for analysing the public construction of populism in the Nordic countries – because it emphasises

contextual and material aspects – than Laclau’s more recent theorisations on populist reasoning highlighting signifying processes on a very abstract level. Thus, even if using ‘empty signifiers’ of ‘the people’, ‘elite’, ‘immigrants’, ‘multiculturalism’ and names of populist leaders has been essential in formation of the Nordic populist movements, this study emphasises the contextual aspects and contingent linkages between various ideologies in populist appeal to quite a heterogeneous group of people.

The contemporary political conjuncture and systemic parallels create homogeneity within the Nordic context with regard to the meanings given to populism. However, a closer analysis of these meanings also exposes differences between the countries and reveals the contexts from which these differences derive. A more detailed comparative analysis would be needed to explore whether the same kinds of articulations have been typical of all populist movements in Democratic Corporatist countries and to find out the contextual differences between them. However, studies on the Benelux countries, Austria and Switzerland indicate that a form of articulation analysis would be quite appropriate for Northern European multi-party democracies in general (cf. Paloheimo 2012). A completely different question is, how well the analysis here would reflect populism in Southern or Eastern European countries, or even North or Latin American populism. Laclauian populism theory might even fit better in Latin America’s antagonistic political arena or with the Spanish and Greek left-wing populist movements Podemos and Syriza than with Nordic radical right-wing populist parties.<sup>iv</sup> However, Eastern European authoritarian populism would seem to be a very different case (cf. Pirro 2014) and one might also ask: What if populist movements in liberal democracies turn into authoritarian regimes?

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<sup>i</sup> Obviously, Laclau refers here to the Althusserian theory of ideology without making any explicit reference (Althusser 1971).

<sup>ii</sup> The populist New Democracy movement broke through to the Swedish parliament in the early 1990s, but it declined after one term.

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<sup>iii</sup> The Danish People's Party and the conservative bloc lost the 2011 elections to a left-wing alliance, reducing media attention on the domestic populist party in Denmark. However, the party was very successful in the next general elections of 2015, and it is probable that media attention was higher for that event.

<sup>iv</sup> Laclau and the Essex School serve as inspiration here.